

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a nominally centralized republic with a population of approximately 60 million. The president and the lower house of parliament (National Assembly) are popularly elected; the members of the upper house (Senate) and provincial governors are chosen by provincial assemblies. Presidential and National Assembly elections held in July 2006 and a presidential runoff in October 2006 were judged credible by international observers. The government's human rights record remained poor in all areas of the country. The government took few actions to hold security forces accountable for continuing abuses including unlawful killing, disappearance, torture, rape, and arbitrary arrest and detention. It tolerated life-threatening conditions in prisons, prolonged pretrial detention, lack of an independent and effective judiciary, and arbitrary interference with privacy, family, and home. Corruption remained pervasive. Security forces and well-placed officials harassed local human rights advocates and UN human rights investigators or abused and threatened journalists.

U.S. strategies to promote democratic principles, practices, values and human rights in the DRC focus on building democratic institutions, reform of the judicial sector and respect for the rule of law. U.S. initiatives support transparent governance, civic participation, legislative accountability, judicial independence, human rights protection, and political pluralism. U.S. priorities also aim to reinforce Congolese political will and capacity for robust and effective leadership and oversight across all levels of government to support efforts by Congo's fledgling constitutional institutions to build a legitimate democratic state.

The United States is committed to working with the Congolese government and international partners to re-establish peace and security and restore state authority in the DRC's eastern provinces, where ethnic militia, local warlords and government troops have caused significant population displacement, low-level conflict and widespread human rights abuses. In November, the Department of State established a diplomatic presence in North Kivu province, and the U.S. helped facilitate agreement between the DRC and Rwanda to address the common threat of Rwandan armed

groups operating in the eastern DRC. In December, U.S. facilitation also helped bring a cessation of hostilities in North Kivu following defeat of government troops by renegade forces. The U.S. continued to act as facilitator of the Tripartite Plus Commission, a regional forum bringing together the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi for discussion of regional security issues.

The U.S. provided technical and material assistance to key DRC institutions, including the National Assembly, provincial assemblies, the Independent Electoral Commission and the Permanent Commission for the Reform of Congolese Law. The U.S. funded training programs for members of the National Assembly and of provincial assemblies from across the DRC. U.S. funding also assisted initiatives to increase public input into key legislation on judicial reform, decentralization, elections management and political parties. The U.S. supported development of post-electoral political processes. U.S. funds provided training in communications, recruitment, finances and other skills for members of political parties, and supported local efforts to facilitate dialogue between civil society and elected officials.

U.S. public diplomacy programs brought American themes of freedom and democracy to the DRC and sent key Congolese leaders to the United States for participation in governance and leadership programs. U.S.-sponsored outreach brought together Congolese university students via forums to promote non-violent advocacy skills and interaction with local government leaders, and implemented a workshop linking Martin Luther King, Jr. with the importance of the rule of law. U.S.-funded international visitor programs enabled Congolese legislators, judges and journalists to travel to the United States and meet with American counterparts. Nine members of the National Assembly studied legislative processes in the U.S. and the relationship between elected officials and their constituents. Congolese judges and magistrates were introduced to the U.S. justice system in a program emphasizing judicial ethics and impartiality. Congolese broadcast professionals participated in the Edward R. Murrow Program for Journalists in the United States. Another program enabled Congolese television and radio staff to produce programming that encouraged dialogue between government and civil society.

Reform of the Congolese justice sector remains a major challenge. The U.S. supported the establishment of mobile courts that brought essential judicial services to remote areas of the provinces of Equateur and Maniema provinces. It funded technical assistance for the drafting of four fundamental laws that will implement the 2006 constitution's mandate to establish an independent judicial system. The U.S. also supported efforts to increase citizens' access to the justice system. U.S. funding provided legal aid and education to victims of sex crimes, and trained magistrates in applying new 2006 laws targeting sexual and gender based violence. The U.S. supported anti-corruption reform initiatives through debates and roundtables involving government officials and civil society. The U.S. also funded community-based committees that engaged local authorities and civil society to address the impact of corruption in disrupting local commerce.

The U.S. sponsored human rights training for judges and police, and helped bring together activists and government officials in forums on human rights policy priorities. In Maniema, U.S. funding supported monitoring of human rights abuses. U.S.-sponsored workshops and lectures trained Congolese journalists and university students in human rights reporting, and established a national network of human rights reporters. A literacy program for women in Orientale province created reading materials in four languages with information on human rights, elections and civics. An NGO based in Maniema, in partnership with the United States, organized printing and distribution of international agreements on victims of torture, particularly women and children. U.S. efforts to advance press freedom included support for training of radio production technicians that led to creation of programming broadcasts in ten of the country's 11 provinces informing listeners of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and explaining the principles and structures created by the new constitution.

The U.S. also funded programs to facilitate conflict resolution. In Orientale's Bafwasende region, a U.S.-sponsored NGO provided broadcast and mediation support to a successful effort peacefully disarm local Mai-Mai militia. A separate program utilized community-based radio theatre to mediate conflict and encourage dialogue in vulnerable communities in the DRC's eastern provinces. In South Kivu province, U.S. funding enabled victims of sexual violence

to receive medical assistance, trauma counseling and reintegration assistance in a society where victims of sexual violence are often ostracized.